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AUTHOR Crowner, James M.
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ABSTRACT

Problems of technical assistance to special educators from developing nations are discussed, and a program of training Spanish-speaking teachers from the U.S. in Mexico is described. After listing a number of alternatives to these problems, the author concentrates on a program he developed in Jalapa, Mexico where Spanish-speaking teachers from the U.S. were placed in private Mexican homes for 8 weeks. It is explained that throughout the morning, the teachers completed courses leading toward special education certification; and throughout the afternoon, under the supervision of U.S. specialists, they worked with handicapped Mexican children. Three follow-up studies of the 4-year program are noted to indicate the success of the program. (Author/SBH)

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A U.S./Mexican Cooperative Training Program to Serve Spanish Speaking Handicapped Children

Abstract

Along with the unique complication of training special educators from the developing nations, the problem of serving handicapped children whose language and culture differ from that of the host school system is introduced.

After listing a number of alternatives to these problems, the author concentrates on a program he developed in Jalapa, Mexico where Spanish-speaking teachers from the U.S. were placed in private Mexican homes for eight weeks. Throughout the morning, they completed courses leading toward special education certification in the U.S. and throughout the afternoon, under the supervision of U.S. specialists, they worked with handicapped Mexican children. Three follow-up studies of the four year program were conducted, all indicating success of the project.

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By: James M. Crowner, Professor
Department of Special Education
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
Carbondale, Illinois 62901
Phone: 618/453-2311

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Introduction

As the developing nations become more advanced in their educational programming, they often turn to others for technical assistance in providing special education services for, at least, the most profoundly handicapped. However, an increasing number of these nations seek to serve those whose handicap is not immediately visible, i.e., the moderately retarded, the behavioral disordered, and the learning disabled.

There are several alternatives available in accommodating the educational leaders of these nations in providing special education technical assistance. This paper discusses briefly these alternatives, the advantages and disadvantages of each, and concentrates, finally, on a plan devised by the Department of Special Education at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in Illinois-U.S.A. We describe this plan because we believe it provides the ultimate good for both nations involved -- and is, therefore, a cooperative rather than an assistance-type program.

Alternatives in Special Education Technical Assistance

Certainly the most popular form of training special educators to serve the handicapped in developing nations -- one which might not be, strictly speaking, considered "technical assistance" -- is the enrollment of students from these nations in the university special education departments of countries with a great deal of experience in the field. This plan would at first glance seem to be the least complicated. But the author has found, after training such students at three major U.S. universities (i.e., Michigan State University, The University of Arizona and Southern Illinois University) that it contains many pitfalls: (1) the degree curricula required of these students is often inappropriate to their unique needs. Academic advisors (having been too often "burned" in the past by students who manage to avoid returning to their homelands) are frequently reluctant to deviate from the degree program of instruction

required of all students -- native and foreign, (2) the advisors and their instructors are, often, painfully unaware of the circumstances governing the professional future of their foreign students and, unfortunately, these students are slow to risk being embarrassed by "introducing" their own problems during a lecture -- unaware that such "intrusions" might contribute a whole new and much welcomed dimension to these lectures.

A second popular alternative in special education technical assistance is direct "in situ" consultation and advisement, usually arranged by government or philanthropic organizations. This arrangement takes a number of forms -- from short workshops; months-long teacher training institutes; or "quickie," two or three day visits by special education leaders from the "developed" nations. In too many cases these programs attempt too much in too short a time and the would-be special educator is left with "a smattering of ignorance." There are, of course, many other cases where this kind of assistance can -- and does -- have a lasting impact. Certainly it offers the advantage of meeting the trainee in what U.S. jargon would term "his own turf."

A last major alternative is the visiting "professor" or "exchange Professor" form of assistance/cooperation. Given the time and cooperation, the visiting professor can be successful in organizing special education teacher training programs -- but the "exchange professor" arrangement is often no more than a "face saving" device and the professor sent to the "developed" nation has little to contribute -- spending much of his time acquiring advanced training in his own area of expertise which, usually, has little to do with special education. As a consequence, there are few departments of special education willing to engage in these rather one-sided and very expensive programs.

All in all, the record of special education assistance in developing nations, at least in the experience of those at Southern Illinois University (where each of the above has been attempted), appears to be of limited effect.

The program described below may not be the answer to the problems of providing assistance to all developing nations. Indeed it may apply to only a few. But, we believe that it does provide those elements which, in our opinion, are criteria of a successful program in working with these nations and, in this sense, may serve as a model for similar activities between established departments of special education and those countries where little or no special education prevails.

The first of these elements is accountability; i.e., the program should demonstrate through both short and long range studies to have succeeded. The second is time efficiency and adaptability; i.e., the program should be offered over a sufficiently long period -- under varying circumstances and with somewhat diverse professional groups and, finally, reciprocity; i.e., the program ought to be of mutual (but not necessarily equal) assistance to both the "developed" and the developing nations involved.

Prime Motives of the S.I.U. vs. Mexican Cooperative

The U.S. tended quickly to become a melting pot of ethnically and linguistically different peoples. During the first vast wave of European migrants to America and following a comparatively brief ghetto-type, "mutual protection" phase, these various groups were encouraged from within and without to fuse with the American culture and/or language. Both parents and educators discouraged the use of the one, foreign language of the home, and a newly acquired, though modest, affluence led many parents to superimpose a form of Americanism on their children. True, a semblance of the foreign cultural influence continued to exist -- as witness the ethnic religious "clubs" which still thrive in the major cities and throughout the U.S., but aside from the openly militant groups, these operate more to preserve tradition rather than for protective autonomy. In recent years, however, following the cultural turmoil of thd 50's and 60's, ethnic pride underwent a radical shift. "Black Power," "Brown Power," etc.

made it highly desirable, if not fashionable, to emphasize one's foreign roots. Thus, bending to the will of newly aware but politically active ethnic groups, the schools began to provide bilingual/bicultural educational programs. Although the movement still remains rather controversial, it carries the force of federal and state mandates and seems to be gathering steam throughout our country.

Some of the critical problems currently confronting bilingual education are: (1) the refinement of identification and diagnostic tools, (2) the placement -- or misplacement -- of bilingual children, and, finally, (3) the training of personnel so as to more effectively serve bilingual exceptional children. Subproblems, (insofar as special education is concerned) are the training of bilingual teachers for hightened cultural sensitivity; advanced understanding of linguistics, and the acquisition of more effective teaching methods and materials.

Eighty to ninety percent of the bilingual children currently being served in the U.S. bilingual/bicultural programs are Spanish-speaking, i.e., they are from environments where Spanish is the principal language spoken in the home. They are from Cuba, from Puerto Rico, but primarily, from Mexico.

The author first became aware of the lack of services for bilingual handicapped children while serving as a Visiting Professor at the University of Arizona. There, a child psychiatrist, a Spanish-speaking Cuban exile and head of the local child guidance clinic, appealed to him to find a Mexican-American graduate student to assist the psychiatrist in working with a Mexican-American child with symptoms of childhood schizophrenia. It appeared that, despite the absence of a language barrier, the psychiatrist could get no response whatever from the child. Within a week, the author's students, following the unique Mexican-American cultural "rites of passage" had the boy prepared for the psychiatrist's treatment program.

After he returned to the Midwest, the author discovered that this case was tragically typical -- but most often without the "happy ending." He was determined to do something about it.

In 1970, Southern Illinois University received partial funding from the U.S. Bureau of Education for the Handicapped to conduct an experimental eight week Summer program in Jalapa, Veracruz, Mexico to prepare personnel to work with Mexican-American exceptional children. The last, concluding week (at the insistance of the B.E.H.) was to be held at Tucson, Arizona where the students were to work with "culturally deprived" Mexican-American citizens. The students -- all required to be fluent in the Spanish language -- lived in local Mexican homes and completed special education coursework (including a seminar providing in depth discussion of their day-to-day experiences) during the morning and spent their afternoons working with local handicapped children. These children were selected from wherever they might be found -- in the streets, in the homes, or in the few, small experimental programs available through the University of Veracruz and the Ministry of Education. Weekends were spent in discovering other sights of Mexico -- from industrialized urban areas to dirt-floored huts in remote mountain villages.

Without question, the greatest criticism we received from nonparticipating fellow U.S. professionals that first year -- and since -- was our selection of Jalapa, the tropical capital city of the State of Veracruz, as a site for this and subsequent Summer institutes. Most felt that we should have spent our entire eight weeks in a U.S. Mexican-American community. Yet, according to post-Summer student evaluations, that first institute's anticlimactic, Tucson week, though carefully structured to compliment the previous weeks of training and experience, was of no value whatever.

In 1974, 1975 and 1976, the eight week institute was repeated, funded by the Illinois Office of Education, with students selected from the State's bilingual education program. These institutes were conducted entirely at Jalapa.

In all follow-up evaluations, the students strongly affirmed our choice of site for the program. We believe, with deep conviction, that a handicapped, Mexican-American child can best be identified -- and served -- only if the teacher is trained to do so by carefully supervised, adequate experience with handicapped children while submerged in the predominant culture of his parents. Further, we believe that this culture must be as geographically removed from the U.S. as is possible. It is not enough that the experience take place in American Latino ghettos, in the Latino dominated rural areas of the American Southwest, or, even in the Mexican border cities. These places are simply too "contaminated" by the U.S. culture to: (1) make a really valid diagnosis of the handicapped child, (2) learn how to effectively communicate with his parents, and (3) learn how to positively effect his learning. The Mexican specialists we worked with may have lacked the sophisticated tools and techniques of the American Special Educator, but their cultural insights and their use of self-made teaching materials were an inspiration to us. All of this, along with that which contributed to their professional role as bilingual teachers -- i.e., an emersion in the life style of their students' Mexican "cousins;" the bewildering sensation, so well known to Mexican-Americans, of being a "stranger in a strange land;" through closer familiarity with his parents' homeland, the chance to help the child develop a sense of ethnic pride, and, finally, the extra bonus of Summer study at a cost no higher than that in an out-of-state American university -- proved the institute's extraordinary value to our students.

But what did we contribute to the welfare of the Mexican handicapped child? As it turned out, much more than either our hosts or we had anticipated. Of course there was the healthy professional exchange between the U.S. and Mexican staff members. Yet there were other dividends. In our first year at Jalapa (1970) Mexican authorities were only beginning to develop a concern for the handicapped child. Those children who could not beg were often abandoned to

the streets. One of our students discovered a crippled child lying in a gutter nearly trampled to death by passengers who had crowded into a recently departed bus. Other students and staff came upon destitute, abandoned retarded, brain damaged or disturbed children every day. One of the group, a particularly idealistic young man, suggested a plan. We would approach these children and offer them a free breakfast if they would learn the Spanish alphabet. At our institute discussion session, the author reminded the group that we were not acquiring animals from the streets that would be once more abandoned at the conclusion of our training program. The staff would actively participate only on the condition that local persons were found to continue the child service program after we had gone. The following day, one of the students announced that his "senora" (land lady), an attractive, young socialite, had agreed to form a group to take over the activity at the conclusion of the institute. And so we begged a kitchen from a local school, we pooled financial resources, and the students set to work on pre-class meals -- and lessons -- to a burgeoning number of dependent, neglected, predominantly handicapped children. Today -- eight years later -- in a modern building sixty handicapped and/or dependent children are being served by a group of influential Jalapinos -- while attending classes conducted by specialists in the home -- or in the public schools. Ironically, the young man who had initiated the program in 1970, recently visited the institution and was turned away by a formidable matron who thought he "looked suspicious." The original socialite had passed her authority on to others, including the governor's wife, and the founder, unknown, went his way quietly.

During the past few years, Mexico has made tremendous strides in serving all its children -- including the handicapped. IMPI (Instituto Mexicano Para la Proteccion de Infancia) is supervised at the national level by the President's

wife and at the state level by the Governor's wife. It is one of the primary activities of these women and the programs they administer are models of professionalism -- each state seeming to compete with the others in excellence.

During our last institute in Jalapa, we worked side by side with the IMPI staff. At one point, the students served as interpreters working with a team of visiting Houston surgical specialists; with their cleft palate child patients; and the children's parents, while these children underwent free corrective surgery. When we left, a formal ceremony was held at which each of our students was presented with certificates of appreciation signed by the Governor's wife.

Evaluation

Three student evaluations were done on the institutes. The first took place on the last day of the program, the second, three to six months following the institutes, and the last, only recently. This latest included all those who had participated in the 1974, 1975 and 1976 institutes and is covered at another session of this Congress by Mrs. Susan Helmer -- herself an institute alumnist and currently completing her doctorate in special education at Southern Illinois University. Mrs. Helmer received an 83% response to her rather extensive questionnaire. Among other things, she discovered that the participants appreciated the program more with each subsequent evaluation. This may prove only that "absence makes the heart grow fonder." Yet we are convinced that there was more to it than this -- that, like remembrance of "old school days," the participants came to recognize that they had learned a great deal more than they first realized. An example: several months ago, the author received a long distance call from a young Mexican-American who had been a participant in the first, 1970 institute. We had not heard from him since, but remember that he came to Jalapa as an extremely militant person who felt that his Mexican "brothers" -- graduate students at the University of Vera Cruz -- would lend sympathy to his near revolutionary fervor. He had his "wings clipped" when

the Mexican students told him to go elsewhere for support. They advised him that they had their hands full in trying to solve their own national problems. Though this experience had nothing whatsoever to do with his training in either special education or bilingual education, he called me to tell me that he had been reflecting on his past and had decided that the 1970 institute was the turning point of his life. He is currently serving as the Vice President of a major U.S. university and wanted us to know how much he appreciated our having made the experience possible.

Another participant, from the 1974 institute, writing of his Jalapa impressions in the Spring issue of the U.S. State Department's journal, "International Educational and Cultural EXCHANGE" summarized nicely the general tone of the student evaluations:

> "I soon realized that when I returned to Illinois in the Fall, I would not be provided with a prescription for eliminating (all) the maladies encountered by my students. I had better, instead, learn to cautiously apply principles gleaned from the college classroom and the practicum to whatever situations might exist. Pat generalizations, regardless of how much they might promise to diminish anxiety and dissonance in a new situation, simply would not work."

Summary

Dr. Samuel Kirk once cautioned the author, "Please, please, try helping them to learn by our mistakes!"

Our Jalapa Institutes may not have been a proper response to Dr. Kirk's admonishions. The thought of introducing the current U.S. battle cry of placement of the handicapped child in "the least restrictive alternative" has dim potential in Jalapa in the year 1978 when a severe or profoundly retarded child can still be found jealously (but lovingly) protected by a grandmother seated in a corner of a room dominated by the child's enormous wooden "holding" cage.

Nor may our institutes be a model for those who do enter cooperative training programs with developing nations. After all, it would be foolish to assume

that our goals were professionally applicable to, as an example, a cooperative in Zululand -- even if they were financially feasible. But we can generalize, we believe, that all of us can benefit by more cross cultural exposure in special education -- regardless of where the culture is found.

Mexico has a long way to go -- as we all have a long way to go. But they have covered more ground in the past eight years than we in the U.S. have in the past 15. With programs such as we have described, we hope that at least in the City of Jalapa, we were able to help this neighbor of ours more effectively cover this ground and that we have contributed as much to their progress as they have contributed to the progress of Mexican-American, handicapped children in the State of Illinois.